THE STORY OF ALICE

Lewis Carroll and the Secret History of Wonderland

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Any hope that Carroll might have been able to prolong his childhood in more conventional ways was crushed within a few months of his departure from Rugby. In May 1850 he matriculated as a member of Christ Church, his father's old college at Oxford, which he finally entered in January 1851 after waiting several months for rooms to become available. Within two days he was on his way back to Croft: his mother had died of an unspecified 'inflammation of the brain', possibly a stroke or meningitis, at the age of forty-seven. The long-term effects of this death on Carroll are hard to judge, although it has been noted how rarely mothers feature in his later writing, usually being replaced by figures like the anonymous older sister who appears at the beginning and end of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, or bullying harridans like the Queen of Hearts. In the shorter term, he proved himself to be impressively resilient, or at least good at pretending; within six weeks of his return to Oxford, he sent a chatty letter back home describing his new life as an undergraduate, which included 'a very sad incident, namely my missing morning chapel' after oversleeping. Perhaps he would have benefited from the 'Alarum bedstead, causing a person to arise at any given hour' shown later that year at the Great Exhibition, which, according to a popular shilling guide, 'by some curious machinery' ejected the sleeper if he did not 'leave his bed immediately on the alarum ringing'. The inventor was Robert Watson Savage, of 15 St James's Square in London, rather than (as is often claimed) the Oxford furniture dealer Theophilus Carter, who would later be offered as a possible model for the Hatter, but the desire to link this sort of invention with Wonderland is understandable. Nobody was more likely than Carroll to appreciate such an inspired mixture of craziness and craftsmanship.

When he attended the Exhibition in July, two months after its official opening, his eye was immediately drawn to some of the 'ingenious pieces of mechanism' on display, including a tree full of 'birds chirping and hopping from branch to branch exactly like life', with another bird depicted 'trying to eat a beetle' in 'uncomfortable little jerks, as if it was choking'. The whole exhibition, he declared, was 'a sort of fairyland'. That was a common reaction to Joseph Paxton's Crystal Palace. Designed as a sturdy iron skeleton beneath a shimmering glass skin, the building had been slotted together so quickly that some observers enjoyed pretending that magic rather than engineering had been responsible. Thackeray's poem on the opening ceremony was typical in drawing on the language of fairy tales, transforming several thousand tons of building work into an airy bubble of fantasy:

> As though 'twere by a wizard's rod
> A blazing arch of lucid glass
> Leaps like a fountain from the grass
> To meet the sun.

Equally appealing to Carroll was the extraordinary variety of objects on display. Even the entrance to the building left him lost for words: 'As far as you can look in any direction you see nothing but pillars hung about with shawls, carpets, etc., with long avenues of statues, fountains, canopies, etc., etc., etc.' Better still, as far as Carroll was concerned, was the fact that the Exhibition organizers had taken a potentially bewildering 'etc., etc., etc.' of objects and arranged them into neat classes (the 'Alarum bedstead' appeared in the official catalogue under 'Hardware, Class 22'), so that when he explored a little further the visual assault of the entrance hall turned out to be part of a coherent design: 'The different compartments on the ground floor are divided by shawls, carpets, etc., and you look down into one after another as you go.' If the Great Exhibition was a modern fairyland, it was also the world's largest filing cabinet.

Victorian Oxford might have produced similarly mixed impressions. Visually it was a jumble of styles, where buildings of every kind jostled

for attention: proudly thrusting Gothic spires; elegantly repeating neoclassical facades; creaking timber-framed shops. That made it a much easier city to experience than to write about, which may be why those who tried often ended up relying on a kind of literary bricolage, from the comic juxtapositions of Keats ('The mouldering arch, | Shaded o'er by a larch, | Stands next door to Wilson the Hosier') to the busy verbal compounds of Hopkins, for whom the 'Towery city' of Oxford was 'Cuckoo-echoing, bell-swarmèd, lark-charmèd, rook-racked, river-rounded'. But Oxford was a mixture of the old and the new in other ways besides its architecture. By the time Carroll arrived in 1851, a railway station had been constructed on the outskirts of the city, after years of wrangling with the university authorities, which meant that sleepy and traditional Oxford was finally connected to the busy modern world. On the other hand, just a short walk up the High Street, Martin Routh continued to shuffle around Magdalen College after more than fifty years as President, having originally been elected as a Fellow over a decade before the French Revolution, and still insisted on wearing the buckled shoes and wig that had fallen out of fashion decades earlier. When he finally died in 1854, his wig was taken by a colleague, the botanist Charles Daubeny, and petrified in a mineral spring, which was in many ways a fitting tribute to a man who had spent the last years of his life being revered as a living fossil. Nor was he the only relic of old Oxford that had somehow survived into the Victorian age. Many of the University's ancient traditions remained as incongruous and immovable as a gargoyle. Undergraduates were still required to wear academic caps and gowns, and were punished if they failed to attend chapel services or return to their colleges before the gates closed at night. Corporal punishment had only recently been abolished, to the dismay of some old hands in the colleges, and Carroll's matriculation ceremony, during which he was officially admitted as an undergraduate of the University, required him to swear in Latin that he would abide by statutes that included the promise 'not to encourage the growth of curls' and 'to abstain from that absurd and assuming practice of walking publicly in boots'.

The popular perception was that Oxford's students were equally set in

their ways. *Hints to Freshmen*, a publication that promised to help 'convert the chrysalis into the butterfly', divided new undergraduates into several distinct 'species', and listed them like a naturalist's field guide: 'the Man who Hunts', 'the Man who Rows' and so on. The period's novelists were similarly quick to distil college life into a familiar set of situations. Carroll owned a copy of *The Adventures of Mr Verdant Green*, which sold more than 100,000 copies within twenty years of its first publication in 1853, and it is crammed with comic examples of the social conventions that the innocent freshman Verdant Green has to learn at 'Brazenface College' (a fictitious version of Oxford's Brasenose College), ranging from why he should hand over a bottle of brandy to his bedmaker (for her 'spazzums') to the perils of making a speech in front of his new friends while staggeringly drunk:

> 'Genelum anladies *(cheers)*, – I meangenelum. *("That's about the ticket, old feller!")* Customd syam plic speakn, I – I – *(hear, hear)* – feel bliged drinkmyel. I'm fresman, genelum, and prow title *(loud cheers)* . . .'

As a result of Green's 'wine' (i.e. drinks party) he misses chapel the next morning, after waking up with a hangover that leaves his head pounding and his hands trembling 'like a weak old man's'. Given how cautious Carroll was when it came to drink – he enjoyed an occasional glass of sherry, but nobody ever reported seeing him drunk – it is unlikely that he ever needed the same excuse, but he would quickly have learned how often this situation was repeated in Oxford, as different undergraduates made the same mistakes, and the rich comedy this could produce.

Christ Church was a promising environment for such thoughts, because even by Oxford's standards it was noticeably out of step with the times. Carroll's second surviving letter home is written in faux medieval English – 'Verily I doe send greeting untoe thee, and wish thee all hail for thy byrthe-day' – which hardly suggests he thought he had joined a dynamic modern institution, and his surroundings would have given this conclusion plenty of support. Although the period's guidebooks praised Christ Church as a 'princely establishment' with buildings of 'uncommon

grandeur', its stonework was crumbling, its plumbing was chaotic, and the long-serving Dean Gaisford, fondly nicknamed the 'Old Bear', stubbornly resisted any renovations or reforms. Tom Tower's great bell still rang 101 times at 9.05 p.m. every evening, stubbornly sticking to 'Oxford Time' long after the rest of the country had changed its clocks to a national standard. Undergraduates were still permitted to keep dogs for hunting – Carroll's first Oxford letter recounts a noisy fight between six of them outside his window – and the sons of noblemen, who wore special caps with gold tassels and dined at High Table, were still treated with a fawning deference even if they merely dabbled in learning as a gentlemanly pastime. While this sort of class segregation was starting to grate in Oxford as a whole, Christ Church continued to be thought of as a place where social style trumped intellectual substance. In *Tom Brown at Oxford* (1861), the spoilt Viscount Philippine arranges for a boxing match to take place in his 'magnificently furnished' rooms in Christ Church, and during the bout it is revealed that he has bet £5 and a pony that one of the participants – a 'servitor', or college servant, who received free tuition in return for waiting on the tables of wealthier undergraduates – will be knocked down by the professional boxer he has engaged for the evening. Probably his moral carelessness and 'sulky' demeanour are supposed to reflect more general attitudes.

Some of Christ Church's real inhabitants might have been cut from *Tom Brown at Oxford* as too implausible for fiction. Chief among them was the geologist William Buckland, a celebrated 'zoophagist' who believed that it was his duty as a member of the human race, to whom God had given dominion over 'every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth' (Genesis 8: 17), to munch his way through the entire animal kingdom. Mole and bluebottle were especially nasty, he observed, and his lodgings in the north-west corner of Tom Quad were famous as a zoological junk shop where cages of snakes competed for space with fossils and crocodile skulls, and a visitor who once heard a soft crunching sound coming from under the table was told that it was probably a jackal eating some of the guinea pigs. Buckland continued to amuse Carroll long after his death in 1856: many unlikely creatures in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* are at risk

of being killed or eaten, and in one letter he teased a child-friend by telling her that he had been visited by three cats, to whom he offered rat-tail jelly and buttered mice (possibly a memory of one of Buckland's tastier meals, which was crispy mice in batter), and only drew a blank when they asked for boiled pelican. But although Christ Church was tolerant of its eccentrics, some of its other procedures were at best entrenched and at worst astonishingly corrupt. When the future tenth Earl of Wemyss came up for an interview with Gaisford in 1837, prior to being admitted as an undergraduate, the only question he recalled being asked was 'How is your father?'

Another famous Oxford type was 'the Man who Reads' – the sort of undergraduate who quickly realizes that the best way to fit into university life is to sit in a library and use its books as camouflage. Carroll's correspondence from Christ Church, listing the writers he intended to study, and shyly referring to a new friend 'who has been here once or twice to tea, and we have been out walking together', marked him out firmly as a member of this undergraduate species. Although the college's sporting hearties occasionally took exception to their presence – in 1830 the fanatically industrious future Prime Minister William Gladstone was beaten up in his rooms at Christ Church by 'a party of men' – for the most part they were left alone with their books. Sometimes these offered encouraging models to follow. *Christ Church Days*, a novel published in 1867 by the reforming clergyman Frederick Arnold, who was born in the same year as Carroll, uses the experiences of its hero to underline the importance of a steady accumulation of knowledge, informing its readers that 'A university career is a race in which the tortoise has a very good chance of winning something good.' That appears to have been the sort of advice Carroll took to heart.

By the end of 1852, he had achieved a Second Class in Classical Moderations and a First Class in Mathematics, together with a nomination to a Studentship (i.e. Fellowship) in recognition of his 'good intellect' and 'steady quiet conduct'. This came with a small but guaranteed income, and permission to reside in college rooms for the rest of his life, so long as he remained unmarried and proceeded to holy orders. In the

end, he managed to achieve a compromise between the demands of his Studentship and his own doubts about whether he was properly suited to full ordination. His reasons for not wanting to become a priest were never fully articulated, although anxiety about having to preach regularly may have played a significant part, as may the difficulty of reconciling his new-found social freedoms with the Church's official policy of discouraging activities such as attending the theatre. In 1861, he was ordained Deacon, which was usually a step on the way to becoming a priest, and although the rules of the college stated that he should take full orders within four years of taking his MA degree, he hesitated on the threshold. He would end up staying there for another thirty-seven years. On 21 October 1862, the Dean of Christ Church threatened to lay the matter before the other college authorities, but by the following day he had experienced a change of heart, and informed Carroll that he would 'do nothing more about it'. Carroll was free to decide for himself whether to follow his father in becoming a priest, or step away from the Church (and Christ Church) altogether. He did neither. Instead he chose to remain at Oxford in an ambiguous role as neither layman nor priest, a sort of ecclesiastical Mock Turtle.

Further evidence of Carroll's hard work survives in the form of three essays he read aloud in Hall to the other undergraduates. Two of these are rather dull arguments from the on-the-one-hand-but-on-the-other school of debating, which focus on the dangers of seeking fame and the difficulty of finding 'unmixed happiness' in life. Only the third example, on the subject of beauty, genuinely fires Carroll's imagination, as he launches into a long catalogue of where beauty is to be found: 'in scenery, in trees, lakes, and mountains, in the vastness of the ocean, in the splendour of Sunrise, and in the rich glow of Sunset, in the broad daylight, and in the majesty of Night, in animals, & last, highest, & grandest of all, in the divine form & features of Man'. By the time he has explained that 'this perception of Beauty in natural objects' is bound up with 'love and admiration for the object in whom this Beauty is perceived', it is clear where his real interest lies: in beautiful people rather than pretty sunsets, 'the object in whom' rather than the object in which.

Carroll's aesthetic sense could be overwhelming: Violet Dodgson recalled that he was 'intensely susceptible to beauty in any form', and once broke down completely while reading her a poem. Such sensitivity would not have been of any great help in his final set of Classical examinations, known as 'Greats', which he passed (Third Class) at the end of Easter Term 1854, and even less so in the final Mathematics papers which he sat in October that year. However, when the results of these examinations were announced, Carroll discovered that he had achieved the highest First among his group of friends, which more or less guaranteed him an academic career for as long as he wanted. 'I feel very like a child with a new toy,' he told his sister Mary, before adding a self-deprecating comic twist: 'I daresay I shall be tired of it soon, and wish to be Pope of Rome next.'

Anyone who saw Carroll entering or exiting Christ Church underneath the bulky stonework of Tom Tower at this time might have been left with mixed impressions. In early photographs he looks like a cross between a military chaplain and a London dandy. His clothes were fastidiously neat,

Carroll's self-portrait (2 June 1857)

featuring crisp white collars and shiny boots, but were also elegant and fashionably cut. His hair fell in glossy chestnut curls around a pale clean-shaven face, but from a razor-sharp parting. He was of average height, around 5'9", but appeared distinctly taller thanks to his upright posture and rake-thin frame. Equally mixed were two assessments of his personality made at around this time. The first was a hastily scribbled 'Character of C L Dodgson' written by Edward Hamilton, an Edinburgh phrenologist who examined Carroll's head in 1852, and from its bumps and depressions somehow deduced that he had 'a strong love of friends', 'much circumspection', 'lofty generous sentiments', 'much good taste for order & dress & elegance' and, as the first characteristic he thought worth recording, 'a strong love of children'. It was, he concluded, 'upon the whole a good Head'. The second was an analysis of Carroll's clear and almost childishly round handwriting undertaken by Minnie Anderson, a family friend he would later photograph, who decided that he had 'a good deal of imitation – would make a good actor – diffident – rather shy in general society – comes out in the home circle – rather obstinate – very clever – a great deal of concentration – very affectionate – a great deal of wit and humour'. Thus far it is little more than a summary of the person she already knew. Her conclusion, however, was more forward-looking: 'imagination – fond of reading poetry – *may* perhaps compose –'.

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